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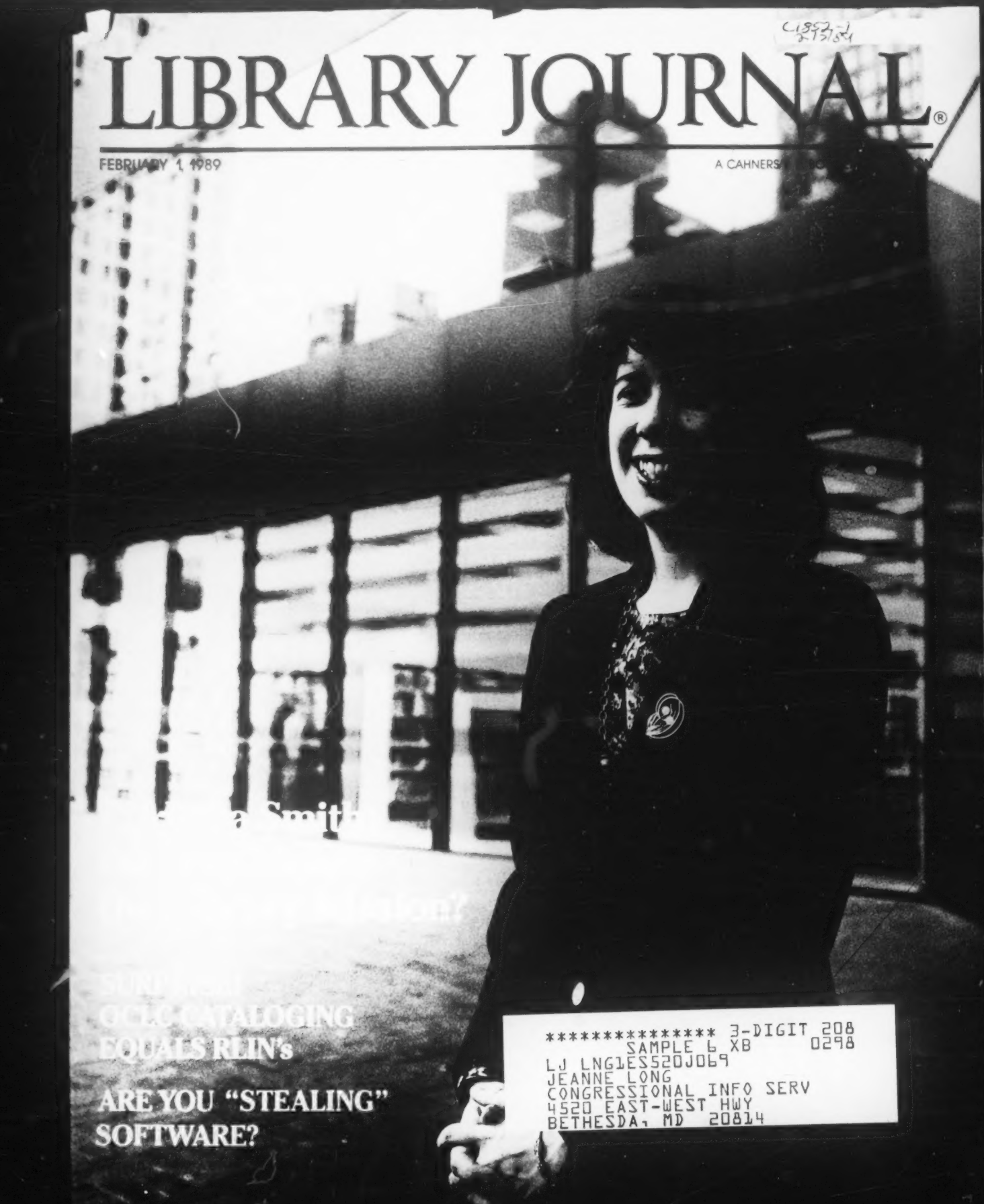

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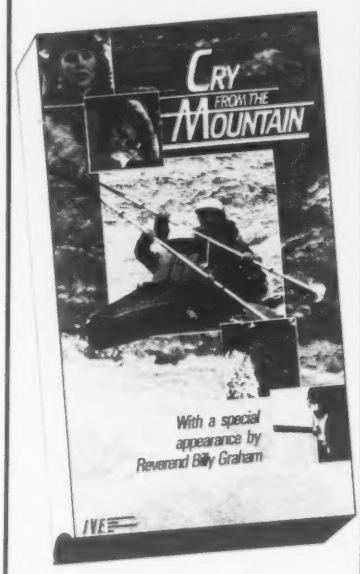

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LIBRARY

Barbara Smith, an information analyst from Houston, thinks fees subvert the mission of public libraries. "A Strategic Approach to Online User Fees in Public Libraries," page 33. Photograph by Jim Caldwell

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The myth of quality difference between OCLC and RLIN cataloging exploded

Much Ado About Nothing: OCLC and RLIN Cataloging Quality

By Sheila S. Intner

IT IS A commonly held belief among catalogers that the quality of original cataloging in OCLC and RLIN differs markedly. One might be led to think that this is the inevitable result of the different paths each network has followed since its inception, OCLC in 1968 and RLIN in 1978. This article reports on a study performed during 1987 that tested this assumption and sought, also, to determine whether some kinds of errors occurred with greater frequency in member-contributed original cataloging.

A look at the background

In the early years of these two major U.S. bibliographic networks, Library of Congress machine-readable cataloging (LC MARC records) formed the nucleus and large majority of records of both databases. Although LC MARC records are not error-free, they were then and are today the highest standard of quality in the country, leaving the networks to assume that most of their cataloging was the best quality available.

Using MARC records as their authority, both databases required member libraries to follow LC practice. Network bibliographic input standards for original cataloging contributions mandated the use of standard cataloging rules and practices: *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, 2d ed. (*AACR2*) and LC rule interpretations. Although classifications and subject descriptors are optional, LC assigns LC and Dewey Decimal class numbers as well as descriptors from *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (*LCSH*). Those, then, are the tools used by libraries that conform to what has become standard U.S. cataloging practice.

Since those early years, the proportion of records in OCLC and RLIN contributed by member libraries has grown steadily, while the proportion of LC MARC records declined. In the last several years, the balance tipped the other way, with member-contributed cataloging comprising the majority (and still-increasing proportion) of records in both databases.

Alternative quality control

The two networks took different approaches to quality control. They had different objectives, pricing structures, cataloging needs and capabilities, and historic developments. At the risk of oversimplifying, it is not unfair to say that OCLC emphasized building its database, encouraging members to contribute new cataloging without applying strict controls on its accuracy and fullness, while RLIN assigned a high priority to cataloging quality, encouraging accuracy and fullness in records even if fewer of them were contributed as a result. Pricing structures reflected this difference, too: OCLC granted the same first-time-use reward to brief records as to full-level records, but RLIN varied its prices according to record quality.

OCLC has a large eclectic membership consisting of libraries of all sizes and types, motivated to participate by a desire for fast, inexpensive cataloging as well as for resource sharing. Some OCLC members joined the network expecting to shrink or eliminate cataloging staffs entirely if all their cataloging could be derived from the network.

RLIN had a small, homogeneous membership made up of research libraries for which the database was to be a major research tool. RLIN libraries, with some exceptions, tended to have huge collections and large cataloging departments. These were full of experienced specialists accustomed to producing full and accurate records for a high volume of research materials. Many of the RLIN libraries' acquisitions were unusual or unique, insuring an ongoing need for original cataloging.

In recent years, OCLC took a series of steps to clean up its database and monitor record quality, just as RLIN took steps to build its database. Yet the notion still remains that OCLC is big and dirty, while RLIN is small and clean.

Study methodology

A group of 215 matched pairs of catalog records contributed by member libraries to OCLC and RLIN were analyzed in the study. They were selected by searching RLIN for entries for books published in 1983 or later for which there was no LC record or other "authoritative" cataloging[1] and for which the member-contributed record was full-level cataloging.

RLIN was searched first by 12 subject disciplines in order to insure that a variety of materials were stud-

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ied, not just, say, new fiction or scientific treatises. In fact, contemporary fiction was largely excluded since it is not usually retrievable by subject. Other deliberate exclusions were dissertations, microform copies of books, and editions other than the original. Dissertations require special cataloging, which might cause problems other than those under investigation. Microform and subsequent-edition cataloging is often based on data for the originals, making it difficult to evaluate the entries on their own merits.

The RLIN hits were searched in OCLC and matches with member-contributed, full-level, nonmicroform, nondissertation, non-subsequent-edition cataloging were accepted for the study.

Two kinds of quality were recognized: accuracy and fullness. Errors were counted for incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, application of *AACR2* or associated LC rule interpretations, and MARC coding. Fullness differences were counted only as differences unless they contravened a rule or LC interpretation when they were counted instead as errors. Absence of classification numbers or subject headings were also considered errors. Fields in which errors occurred were noted so that problem areas could be identified more precisely.

Results

Simply put, careful analysis of the two sets of records revealed no statistically significant differences in accuracy or fullness between OCLC and RLIN cataloging. The total number of errors in each database differed only by seven: OCLC records contained 537 errors; RLIN records contained 530. The total of 1,067 errors in all records averaged almost two-and-one-half per record. Only 39 records were error-free, 22 from OCLC and 17 from RLIN.

Considering the large number of data elements and characters involved, these summary statistics do not explain that most errors would not hinder retrieval, since access points were generally correct, titles were transcribed correctly almost all the time, etc. Neither would errors necessarily invalidate the information in the records for all purposes depending on the type of error and the particular requirements of the user. They do highlight the inability of quality control measures undertaken by either network to prevent the large number of errors from occurring in these records, at least as of the time the study was done. (It is possible that they were corrected in records derived from them in either or both databases.)

Table 1
Occurrence of Errors

Error Type	OCLC # (%)	RLIN # (%)	Total # (%)
AACR2 & *LCRIs*	205 (19.2)	191 (17.9)	396 (37.1)
Punctuation	145 (13.6)	144 (13.5)	289 (27.1)
Tagging & fixed fields	97 (9.1)	81 (7.6)	178 (16.7)
Capitalizing	36 (3.4)	53 (5.0)	89 (8.4)
Spelling	36 (3.4)	50 (4.7)	86 (8.1)
Call numbers	10 (0.9)	5 (0.5)	15 (1.4)
Subjects	8 (0.7)	6 (0.5)	14 (1.2)
TOTAL ERRORS	**537 (50.3)**	**530 (49.7)**	**1,067 (100.0)**

The largest number of errors occurred in the proper application of *AACR2*, in accordance with LC practice. Following this in descending frequency of occurrence were errors in punctuation, MARC encoding, proper capitalization, spelling, call numbers, and subject headings (see Table 1). Information about the publication and/or distribution of the book conflicted with the rules most often.

Other trouble spots in descriptive cataloging included main and added entries, notes, titles, and series statements. There were 178 errors in the main and added entries, but only 55 of these affected retrieval—26 in OCLC records and 29 in RLIN records. All things considered, errors affecting retrieval constituted only a small proportion of all the errors counted (about five percent).

Examining the noninterpretive errors more closely, it is easy to see that punctuation errors outstripped other typographical problems, such as spelling or capitalization, occurring 264 times. In contrast, there were only 178 tagging, 89 capitalization, and 86 spelling errors. Speculating on the reason for the large number of punctuation errors, the research team wondered if some of the errors could be attributed to inputters, not catalogers.

Inputters might alter catalogers' punctuation to conform to the rules of ordinary citation style, thinking they were correcting mistakes; or the use of handwritten worksheets might be hard to decipher, leading inputters to substitute other marks of punctuation for those actually intended. Furthermore, the change in punctuation from pre-*AACR* style to current international standards (conforming to the dictates of International Standard Bibliographic Description) still might be poorly understood, despite more than a decade in use.

Inputters' errors might also account for other typographical errors, such as incorrect capitalization, spelling, and tagging. A legitimate argument that its cost outweighs its importance can be made against the practice of revising finished cataloging copy before uploading it to the networks. On the other hand, if revision by an experienced cataloger of the finished entries is no longer commonplace, there is always the possibility that studies such as this one attribute the errors to the wrong people—to the original catalogers, not the operators who actually key the data into the system. Another answer is that revisers examine the entries, but overlook the finer typographical details of records—a troubling notion, but still a possibility.

What does it all mean?

The commonly held belief that there are important differences in cataloging quality between OCLC and RLIN does not appear to hold up in light of the findings of this study. Bearing in mind that the differences (or their absence) between the two sets of entries could have occurred by chance, the facts are that virtually no differences were found between the 215 pairs of entries. Certain errors occurred with greater frequency in the cataloging analyzed in the study, particularly those involving the application of descriptive cataloging rules according to LC practice—currently the national standard for both bibliographic networks—as well as errors in punctuation and MARC encoding.

Most of the records in this small representation contained errors of some kind. This fact implies it would be difficult, if not impossible, for student or neophyte catalogers in libraries to learn accurate, high-quality cataloging by emulating them. In this set

Table 2
Cataloging Errors: Errors in *AACR2* Rules and *LCRI* Interpretations

Descriptive Area	OCLC # (%)	RLIN # (%)	Total # (%)
Title	24 (6.1)	21 (5.3)	45 (11.4)
Edition	1 (0.3)	2 (0.5)	3 (0.8)
Publication data	64 (16.2)	52 (13.1)	116 (29.3)
Physical data	12 (3.0)	13 (3.3)	25 (6.3)
Series	18 (4.5)	22 (5.5)	40 (10.0)
Notes	35 (8.8)	41 (10.4)	76 (19.2)
ISBN	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Main & added entries*	51 (12.9)	40 (10.1)	91 (23.0)
TOTAL ERRORS	**205 (51.8)**	**191 (48.2)**	**396 (100.0)**

* Includes *LCRI* errors in name headings used as subject headings

of records, however, only a small percentage of errors affected retrieval, echoing earlier research by Taylor and Simpson on LC cataloging beginning as cataloging-in-publication.[2] If these findings for 430 records hold generally throughout the database, then searchers are in less danger of failing to find desired entries than might be supposed from the large number of errors overall.

Cataloging teachers, both those who give formal courses in library school programs and those who conduct workshops, institutes, and in-service training, might take into account in designing their courses that a number of important elements in original cataloging seem to be confusing or poorly understood. Chief among these are:

- application of the LC's *AACR2* rule interpretations;
- the choice of publication dates and publishers names from the information given in books;
- proper order of notes;
- punctuation rules; and
- coding of the 008 field (i.e., in OCLC and RLIN the fixed fields).

More data, more info

In a separate survey of 50 catalogers and cataloging educators reported earlier in 1988,[3] the author found the majority of those answering believed that LC rule interpretations and details of the MARC formats should not be taught in the first basic cataloging course. If this information is reserved for advanced courses, a good many students will receive their degrees without ever encountering it. Then what?

Consider this scenario:

A newly graduated librarian, searching for several months for a job "helping people," finds the only available position offered is in a catalog department. S/he needs a job, so accepts the offer and goes off to work. The cataloging department is staffed primarily by paraprofessionals, who are expert at editing cataloging done by LC, which can be found for about 40 percent of the materials purchased by the library. Another 50 percent of the materials have online entries that don't originate at LC. These entries and the ten percent for which original entries must be done are the responsibility of the professional staff, including our new librarian.

The department head spends about half of the new librarian's first day introducing her/him to the rest of the staff and touring the library with special stops at the OCLC terminals, the catalogers reference shelf, the shelflist, public catalog, staff lounge, and restrooms. Lunch at the cafeteria follows. The cataloging routines—workflow procedures and local practices followed only in this library—are explained. Staff committees are described and the newcomer is told s/he is expected to serve on at least one of them during this first year.

The new librarian is assigned a desk (sometimes temporary, because the department is moving, being reorganized, or the position has been vacant so long that others moved in to occupy the space), a couple of shelves on the original cataloging stacks, and a group of paraprofessionals whose works s/he will revise. At this point, another hour or two may be spent in the personnel office, signing forms registering for the library's health plan and retirement funds. The balance of the first day may be spent sitting with a veteran cataloger, if there is one, learning workflow procedures in greater detail.

The next morning, our new librarian is on her/his own. Since production is off because of the short staffing of the immediate past and the day devoted to indoctrinating the newcomer, the department head tries to make up for it by telling the newcomer to work mostly on editing existing copy. Learning the local ropes of assigning call numbers goes slowly at first. Pressure builds in the first weeks to increase output.

Work piles up on the newcomer's shelves, and, by the time s/he begins original cataloging, familiarity with existing online entries bolsters her/his confidence to plunge ahead and get the stuff done. The fledgling cataloger doesn't realize that a precedent for almost any error likely to be committed can be found online or that a great deal of the descriptive cataloging in the network and the public catalog is pre-*AACR2*. The punctuation of the entries looks funny, although the newcomer remembers hearing something about it in library school. And so it goes.

Think this is far-fetched? It is exactly as described by more than one of the author's former students. It could account for the fact that even experienced catalogers appear to be unaware of the proper application of some of the cataloging rules, LC rule interpretations, and encoding conventions when they are encountered during workshops or institutes.

A fair conclusion is that the myth of difference between OCLC and RLIN might well be just that—a myth without basis in fact.

References

1. *Authoritative cataloging* is defined as national-level cataloging done at the Library of Congress, National Library of Medicine, National Agricultural Library, Government Printing Office, or the national libraries of Canada and Great Britain. The authority of this cataloging lies in the fact that it is the standard adopted by both networks for bibliographic input by their members.
2. Taylor, Arlene G. & Charles W. Simpson, "Accuracy of LC Copy: A Comparison Between Copy That Began as CIP and Other LC Cataloging," *Library Resources & Technical Services*, Oct./Dec. 1986, p. 375-387. Their study determined that between 20 percent and 28 percent of the errors found affected retrieval—a much larger percentage than found here. However, the five percent figure used here relates solely to descriptive cataloging headings and does not address problems in subjects or other retrieval points.
3. Intner, Sheila S., "Practical and Theoretical Knowledge in Cataloging: What We Should Teach and Why," in Savard, Réjean, ed. *Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice: Proceedings of the First Joint Meeting Between the Association Internationale des Écoles de Sciences de l'Information (AIESI) and the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), Montreal, Canada, 25-26-27 Mai/May 1988*. Montreal: The Conference, 1988, p. 259-284.